

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Professor Jaap de Hoop Scheffer
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Date 12 April 2018
Re Request for advice on human rights and the SDGs

Dear Professor De Hoop Scheffer,

After the Second World War, a wide range of international human rights instruments were developed. They were based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1948, in which the universality of human rights was confirmed at international level for the first time. This heralded a period spanning several decades in which the protection of human rights steadily improved, in part through the adoption of a number of legally binding human rights agreements. Nevertheless, human rights cannot be upheld by law alone. They must be embedded in the fabric of society.

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by UN member states in 2015 generated worldwide momentum for sustainable development and more extensive global cooperation. Specific targets have been set to end poverty and inequality and halt climate change by 2030. The SDGs highlight the importance of rights, respect and dignity under the overarching principle that no one may be left behind. Their strong focus on human rights provides helpful support for a political and rights-based approach to development, with human interests at its core.

Respect for human rights and freedoms, as laid down in international agreements, is a key precondition for sustainable development and conflict prevention. The SDG agenda cannot be implemented successfully if human rights are not observed, and vice versa. Experts regard the SDGs and human rights instruments as frameworks for an enduring commitment to preventing violent conflict. The two agendas can be mutually reinforcing in many ways.

However, there has so far been no systematic research into specific potential for promoting human rights by striving to achieve the SDGs – and vice versa. In light of the above, the government would request that the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) issue an advisory report, by the end of 2018 at the latest, addressing the following questions:

Main question: How can the Dutch commitment to the SDGs and Dutch foreign policy on human rights, as set out in the policy letter 'Justice and Respect for All', reinforce each other?

Subsidiary questions:

1. What overlap is there between the two agendas and how do they complement each other?
2. What specific opportunities exist that would allow the SDGs to contribute more to promoting human rights at international level?
3. How can Dutch foreign policy on human rights make an optimum contribution to achieving the SDGs that relate to Dutch policy priorities?

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We look forward to receiving an operational advisory report containing specific guidance on Dutch foreign policy, with a particular focus on human rights and the SDGs.

Yours sincerely,

Stef Blok
Minister of Foreign Affairs

Sigrid A.M. Kaag
Minister for Foreign Trade and
Development Cooperation